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THE CITY AS OPPRESSOR: THE ETHOS OF URBAN LIFE IN ADIGA'S LAST MAN IN TOWER

Saliha Rehmani[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine Adiga's 'Last Man in Tower' as relevant to the present day century for its representation of the everyday life in Mumbai. It also explores the variety of themes, background and motifs in the work with an aim to focus on its original framework, not cut off from the everyday life. The novel risks concentrating its power in the suspense of whether Masterji will triumph or eventually be subsumed by peer pressure, external threat or both. But Adiga also manages to thicken his narrative with a subtle and nuanced examination of the nature of personal corruption - more subtle in fact, than in TheWhite Tiger. The novel is so richly insightful about business and character; that Adiga knows economies well should come as no surprise. On the whole, in this complex and multilayered novel, Adiga continues his project of shining a light on the changing face of India, bringing us a picture that is as compelling as it is complex to decipher.

Preamble

The novel, as a literary phenomenon in comparison to the western tradition, is new to India. It has retained its unique character and quality since its inception. The heritage of India and the tradition of Indianness are interwoven into the writings ever since they found its way into literary canon. Strictly speaking, the novel and other prose forms took shape not until the latter half of the 19th century. Since then there have been innumerable works published in a dozen Indian languages and also in English. The greatest gift of the British Raj to the Indian subcontinent was probably the English language and its rich and varied literature. 'Indian – English writing has come to stay as part of world literature', remarks writer Mulk Raj Anand. Indo-Anglican literature is an all-India phenomenon and an offshoot as well as recordation of modern Indian renaissance. Most of the builders and makers of modern India from Raja Ram Mohan Roy figure in its pages, and since many of the creative writers have been purposively bilingual they too cast their reflected light on this literary history. In the result, a history of Indo-Anglican literature inevitably becomes something more than a survey of one of the fifteen or twenty literatures flourishing in contemporary India. Indian writing in English is but one of the voices in which India speaks. It is a new voice, no doubt, but it is as much Indian as the others.

[1] Lecturer in English (FIP Substitute), St. Joseph's College, Devagiri.

The typical Indianness and recurrent depiction of the sordid everyday life in Indian society in works penned by the luminaries in the field remain a common characteristic of Indian-English writing. Realism became an integral part of Indian writing such that all works were almost like 'slices of life' mirroring the society with which it is related in a remarkably brilliant way. Mulk Raj Anand's Bakha *(The Untouchables*, 1935*)* would be a classic case in point. The patriarch of Indian literature, R.K.Narayan glorified his small town Malgudi wherein situations would least demand any out of the ordinary representation for its popularity. If this has been the legacy practiced by the early generation Indian writers, how different would the novels of the current millennium be? The question as to whether the present time novels also project everyday lives is a topic worth discussion. This paper attempts to examine Adiga's 'Last Man in Tower' as relevant to the present day century for its representation of the everyday life in Mumbai. It also explores the variety of themes, background and motifs in the work with an aim to focus on its original framework, not cut off from the everyday life.

'Mumbai city dominated like no other by builders and collusive politicians is Adiga's adopted home and thematic setting of his new novel.'

Aravind Adiga's second novel '***Last Man in Tower' (2011***) is a dizzying portrait of the city of Mumbai – a slice of life convincingly made to glimpse into the depths of human nature. The work has often been praised as a brilliant, remarkable and mature one, second to only his powerfully scathing debut work, *The White Tiger* (2008) that shot him into fame and glory. This paper explores the dynamism that the work under discussion retains, the kinds of which can be felt in his previous novel. It, however, also attempts to bring out the sordidness of life that exposes the reality with which Mumbai has been living through since the past decade. *Last Man in Tower* is wonderfully rich in detail and evocation of everyday life. It presents a mixed portrait of Mumbai and revolves around the actions that take place in the life of its protagonist, Murthy (affectionately called 'Masterji'). Though Victorian characteristics may be discerned in its treatment of various social and moral concerns; Adiga is primarily noted to be knowingly or unknowingly a follower of Dickens. The Dickensian elements in the work and the mirroring of some of Dickens' stylistic devices are obvious, yet it's to be added that the work is a consciously Dickensian novel which gives ample space to all sections of the society alike. In spite of imperfections, it has to be acknowledged that Adiga's representation is true to life and praiseworthy for his success in breathing life into his characters, all of which embody the everyday life situations. The paper as such traces the character of Murthy, the loner who raised objection against the rest of humanity, thereby leaving him as the last man in tower.

'I would not like my reader to think Masterji is the hero and Dharmen Shah, villain. If there is any hero in the book, it's BOMBAY'- Aravind Adiga (Booker prize winner, 2008)

Adiga has shown how crushing poverty resides side by side with wealth. Bombay, he says, puts a price on everyone. He who doesn't put a price on himself in Bombay finds it difficult to survive. This novel is so close to reality. It's mainly because the world Adiga creates is very small- just a building and the lives of people in and around it with very occasional detours. The book also leaves you with poignant aftertaste being built around only one idea-the irrelevance of ideals in today's consumerist world. The fact that masterji refused to accept the offer to the lat is a triumph of ideals; that he'd a price for it is another matter. Like his *The White Tiger*, Adiga tells a gripping story and leaves the reader with many questions. Just as his debut novel, this work also takes a sardonic at the human consequences of the materialism that has fuelled India's economic boom. Adiga's fiction interprets the 'new' India for the West and like Danny Boyle's more sentimentalized SlumdogMillionaireand the fiction of Rohinton Mistry, particularly *A Fine Balance*; the novel exposes some of the harsher realities of Mumbai society. It has much in common with Mistry's first two books, which, like *Last Man in Tower*, is centered on the action on the residents of a building. In Mistry's case, the occupants of the building were members of the Parsi community in which he grew up. Adiga's perspective is altogether more contemporary and the communal range is much wider. The building in question is Vikram Society, Tower A, located near the city's Santa Cruz Airport, literally on the wrong side of the railway tracks, a 'pucca' tower in a 'not quite pucca' neighbourhood. Vikram Society has become the target of a property developer, planning to demolish it to construct more upmarket housing. So Tower A, though far from ancient, serves as a metonym for a lifestyle that is under threat as the new India expands its sphere of influence; its residents tend to be slightly older than their neighbours in Tower B, who succumb to the builder's offer more readily. At one point the novel says, **'in oldbuildings, truth is a communal thing, a consensus of opinion**', but the lure of the offer fractures this notion of consensual truth. Motivated by self-interest, some of the occupants quickly agree to sell out; others are slower to do so.

Last Man in Tower is a quieter novel than *The White Tiger* , where the narrator-protagonist Balram Halwai is explicit about exposing the 'Darkness' that lies beneath the global success-story of contemporary India. Adiga seems thoroughly at home with his Mumbai world, far more so than in his often melodramatic representations of village India and Delhi drivers in *The White Tiger*, and the social nuances of particular Mumbai locations are deftly realized. The third –person narrative is more persuasive than the arch method of the earlier novel, where letters written to a visiting Chinese premier to explain the condition of India seem to disguise the novel's main target readership, in the West. Last Man is also more plausible than *The White Tiger* and the characterization is more satisfying: Tower A is populated by a cross-section of people who sketch in 'the moral evolution of an entire neighbourhood'.

One by one they succumb to the blandishments of the builder, until the last man standing, and thereby obstructing the financial windfall that would accrue to the others, the retired schoolmaster, Masterji, finds himself isolated even from his closest friends. The ubiquitous question of Mumbai society is '**What do you want?**' and the problem with Masterji is that he wants nothing, other than to be left alone with the memory of his late wife and daughter. His behaviour becomes inexplicable in a world where everything and everyone is believed to have a price and his resistance makes him a doomed figure.

Masterji's simply saying 'no' could evoke tragic protagonists who refuse to compromise, even when they endangers their lives, but there is little sense of powerful moral integrity driving his behaviour. Poised between life and death in the denouement, he feels he is in this predicament, because 'he was neither good nor bad enough; and neither strong nor weak enough' and this is typical of the novel's view. Ordinary people succumb to pressure or make a stand without displaying great convictions; potential villains prove to be not so bad after all. Even the builder, the hawkish Dharmen Shah, a man who has risen from humble origins, is seen from the inside. Exploitative though he unquestionably is, he aims to be more generous than his rivals and when he is frustrated in his plans, he leaves enforcement to his 'left–hand man'. Last Man presents a tangled moral universe, in which ethics are compromised by the pursuit of profit, but never quite destroyed. It's a fine novel, and all the more so because of its ability to generate mounting narrative tension, while offering a convincing portrait of everyday life.

'**Resistance makes him a doomed figure'**

Masterji inadvertently becomes an opposer of the capitalist drive of property developer, Dharmen Shah. In an efficient portrayal of rapacious greed and ambition, Shah tantalises the residents of a Tower A with enough rupees to double their dreams for self-improvement. However the decision to accept Shah's offer must be unanimous: all in or all out.

Community in the novel is a dispirited collection of individuals attempting to survive with whatever luck and talent they were born with. The residents of tower seem to be a cohesive and amicable group. But it does not take a great deal o dismantle his civility and mutual regard; an offer of money is all that is needed. Some grasp the opportunity faster than others but only Masterji refuses the offer. It is difficult to see Masterji as a moral hero or anti-capitalist, worker's hero. His toxic relationship with his son is one of the most poignantly understated subplots in the novel. He still feels emotionally closer to the two dead women in his life. The facts of his daughter's death - in the midst of seeing and sightless mass of her countrymen and women. – is truly disturbing.

Dispossessed of support of family, friendship and society, he turns o institution of law and order to aid him. There is satire and irony at several instances revolving around Masterji. Real life is inescapable but fiction must elevate it to art so that the reader can perceive is multitude of connections. Shah poses the question: 'What is Bombay?' while assessing the city with his customary avarice. He was one of the peasants who arrive in the glittering city with cow

dung on their bare feet and inarticulate hopes. He now owns more than enough material splendours but his health is corrupted by atrocious working practices he advocates - a widower who's totally lost his only son. The contest is between the wealthy lonely old man and the poor lonely old man. By portraying the city's crowd, a surprising array of individuality is also born. Hailing in Mumbai, Adiga chooses for his setting this city and lends it heroic qualities. Masterji is the eponymous last man, entrenches in his commitment to resistance, secure in his belief in the power of cooperative living, impervious of bribes and threats alike.

'Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free'

A lone man in Mumbai refusing to sell out to a greedy builder – this ordinary and predictable theme, probably, does lack imaginative leaps that characterised Adiga's exciting debut. Nevertheless the resistance of Masterji is to be appreciated and the theme acknowledged whereby it becomes as mature as the former work. Resistance of the residents is whittled away by bribery and threats, until Yogesh Murthi, remains the only man refusing to sell. Shah and Murthy, by far, the two most important figures in the work, are poles apart in character. Murthy sees himself as a lotus in the mud, whereas Shah views him as a stick-in-the-mud. The two mirror, in some ways, the conflict between the purity of Antigone and the pragmatism of Creon in Jean Anouilh's version of the Greek legend. In the years since liberalisation, there's a strengthening of Creon's position and a weakening of Antigone's. The novel stays within this new zone of ethical ambivalence, expertly guiding the reader's sympathy first Murthy's way, then Shah's, bringing episodes from their past into the mix to make rational decisions appear questionable, and questionable ones, rational.

Mumbai – A Microcosm of India

'Mumbai city dominated like no other by builders and collusive politicians is Adiga's adopted home and thematic setting of his new novel.'

Last Man in Tower is, no doubt, Adiga's bittersweet homage to Mumbai. The bulk of the work plays out during Mumbai's sweltering summer and sodden monsoon. The city, dominated like no other by builders and collusive politicians is Adiga's adopted home, and he revels in delineating its sweaty streets, jam-packed trains, ill-maintained buildings, sprawling shanties, its venality and energy. Instead of hammering the reader with negative adjectives, he adopts a far more effective tactic, keeping to simple nouns and ending with a sentence that would be appetizing in isolation, but turns out nauseating in the context. There exists every chance that this work could become the definitive Mumbai-Bombay novel of the current era. Though not a masterpiece, Adiga's latest work remains a superbly composed homage to, and critique of, what was once India's greatest city. It is a state of the nation novel or more accurately a state of

Mumbai novel. Adiga draws a clear cut fault line in a society in Mumbai, his conscious Dickensian style novel, that of slum dwellers, criminals, police, immigrants, lawyers and fruit - sellers who do have their rich say. The evocative astonishing descriptions of temples, churches, mosques, public buildings, hawkers etc display the life of Mumbai and make it as the central theme of the novel and therefore Mumbai is the central character. Hence it may be observed that *Last Man* is a clear reflection of the everyday Indian life and its narration is rich in detail. Its periphery encompasses the Mumbai and its estate market and the builder-politician nexus, the unhygienic condition of living in Mumbai, slums, the middle class psyche, the appalling crime and the problem of immigration. In Mumbai, property development is a serious business. Sometimes deadly serious. It is also to be noted that there is a Dickensian breadth to this novel of Mumbai life, and the conflict between the haves and have-nots. It is a cliché to observe that contemporary Indian novels often have a Dickensian aspect, in their purview of seething city life dominated by fearful contrast between wealth and squalor. Dominating the narrative is Mumbai itself, one of the mightiest cities on earth. The macrocosm for the novel is the countless millions of workers who endure nightmarishly cramped commuted trains each day and pack themselves into teeming communal housing each evening. One of the many brilliant scenes has Masterji walking by one of Shah's teeming construction sites, which is rushing to complete initial work before monsoon season. This is a microcosm of Adiga's larger statement about modern India that bursts out of *LastMan In Tower* – he sees it as a gleaming building that projects positive, wealthy image with a crippled support system on the inside.

In Lieu of Concluding

Adiga skilfully poses these problems and equally skilfully frustrates our attempts to answer them. For much of the time, our sympathy is almost entirely with Masterji, particularly as his neighbours – whose bad behaviour has hitherto been largely confined to gossiping, eavesdropping and nosing around in one another's rubbish bins - begin to treat him with increasing disdain and viciousness. Similarly, Adiga's portrait of Shah as a rapacious, bullying parasite seems, at first sight, to preclude very much in the way of tenderness or respect. *Last Man in Tower* can tend slightly towards the schematic – as each resident falls inexorably under Shah's spell. The novel risks concentrating its power in the suspense of whether Masterji will triumph or eventually be subsumed by peer pressure, external threat or both. But Adiga also manages to thicken his narrative with a subtle and nuanced examination of the nature of personal corruption - more subtle in fact, than in *TheWhite Tiger*. His targets are similar: the web-like social structures that surround citizens, creating a stasis that defies attempts at progress. The novel is so richly insightful about business and character; that Adiga knows economies well should come as no surprise. Commenting over his first novel, Adiga expressed that the readers must be both entertained and disturbed by it so that the readers would think long and hard about how the economic growth to India by globalization is transforming the country's culture. Clearly, he was gunning for the same effect in this novel too, but this time the topic is real estate and the conflicting interests of community and development. We also come to gather the novel as an existential one. Like Jean-Paul Sartre's play 'No Exit', it provides a kind of locked-room character study as the residents of the residents of the Vishram try desperately, then viciously, to

persuade Masterji to accept Mr. Shah's lucrative destruction. Bit by bit, Adiga strips away the characters' faith in themselves as good people, revealing long-buried seams of pride, greed, hubris, envy and cowardice. Under pressure, they turn against each other, giving voice to grievances buried for decades, and then turn toward each other to form a fearsome mob. Vain, shrewd and stubborn, Masterji is one of the most delightfully contradictory characters to appear in recent fiction. Is Masterji's refusal meant to protect a more vulnerable tenant? Is he holding out for more cash? Adiga himself refuses to give a clear answer.

Adiga adds another layer by deftly, slyly aligning Masterji's position with that of old India. It's no coincidence that some of the novel's most violent actions take place against a background of patriotic songs and Mahatma Gandhi's birthday. Or the residents' first action against Masterji is a boycott – a favourite manoeuvre of Gandhi against the British colonialists. Adiga traces his characters' wicked impulses more convincingly than he details their occasional surges of virtues, and the book's final, hopeful note feels largely unearned. But these are small flaws compared with the novel's many delights and its unusually even-handed take on urban development. 'Money itself is amoral. It can liberate people as easily as it can destroy them.'(Adiga, Times of India).

On the whole, in this complex and multilayered novel, Adiga continues his project of shining a light on the changing face of India, bringing us a picture that is as compelling as it is complex to decipher.

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